Wilderness and Wild Preserves: Still Relevant—and Resilient—After All These Years

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In the late nineteenth century, conservation groups and policymakers began to devote a great deal of attention to preserving untrammeled places. Wilderness and other preserves, such as parks and wildlife refuges, provide large blocks of undisturbed habitat for a diverse array of species, protect headwaters and watershed integrity from development and pollution, combat global warming through carbon sequestration, foster high quality recreational opportunities, and provide many other ecological and anthropocentric benefits. Accordingly, laws governing the management of such preserves generally require protection of their “wild” characteristics and forbid impairment of “natural” features and functions within them.

More than a century later, it is fair to ask whether preserving wilderness is a sustainable strategy in the face of climate change. Even without intentional human intervention, the ecological characteristics of wilderness and other preserves will change, as glaciers melt, sea levels rise, populations of species migrate, and precipitation patterns shift. Meanwhile, ever-increasing pressure to develop and exploit wilderness characteristics in hopes of mitigating the adverse effects of climate change is inevitable. Proposals to build dams and reservoirs to capture early snow-melt, to seed clouds in an effort to stimulate precipitation, and to translocate imperiled species to cooler, higher elevations are under consideration and, in some regions, are already underway. These proposals have significant conservation implications. On one hand, resilience theory emphasizes flexibility, change, and transformation—concepts that seem antithetical to strategies that insist on the iron-clad preservation of areas perceived to be “wild.” Yet at the same time areas that are protected from overt human-dominated intrusions provide an important baseline against which to measure the effects of more active, experimental management strategies on adjacent lands.

This presentation will argue that wilderness is still relevant. Although our conception of “wild” and “natural” is likely to and probably must evolve, resilient conservation strategies and laws must continue to protect wild places from impairment. Certain legal reforms are warranted, however, to compel heightened monitoring and sensitivity to ecological feedbacks as well as better coordination with the management of adjacent lands.